

I. M. PEI'S MUSEUM FOR CHINESE ART, SHANGHAI, 1946

Modernism, regionalism and the search for an architectural representation of national identity

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Abstract

My paper looks into the Chinese American architect I. M. Pei's first museum project, the Museum for Chinese Art, Shanghai, conceived as his answer to an architectural representation of national identity in 1946. Although Pei's project is envisaged for China, I consider it to be a key example that intervenes in the debate between modernism and regionalism in America in the 1940s.

In February 1948, the Progressive Architecture published in its latest issue Pei's graduation project at Harvard Graduate School of Design, finished under the supervision of Walter Gropius. Though unrealised, the design is highly acknowledged in the P/A as a monumental piece of modern museum. The scheme suggests an extremely modernist statement, combined with the theme of a traditional Chinese garden. While the P/A article well presents its modernist vocabulary through architectural plans and close-up photos of the model, the project's equal consideration of representing local characteristics has not been fully recognised.

My paper argues how Pei's design introduces an architectural representation of national identity through the means of architectural regionalism, apart from its testimony to the canon of modern architecture. In my paper, I will briefly delve into the context of architectural debates between modernism and regionalism in America in the 1940s, and then identify the project's representation of local elements as a reflection of regional characteristics. Evidence is seen from the fact that Pei intends his museum for a very specific location, the unfinished urban plan of the Civic Centre in the Jiangwan District of Shanghai in 1933, along with the project's emphasis on characteristic language of the Chinese garden. Placing itself in a Chinese context, Pei's design offers a distant but alternative view towards understanding the conception of architectural modernism and modernity for American audience.

Keywords: Modernism, modern architecture, regionalism, nationalism

In February 1948, the American magazine *Progressive Architecture* presented a museum designed by the Chinese-American architect, I. M. Pei (Figure 1). Titled "Museum for Chinese Art, Shanghai," this was Pei's graduate work at Harvard Graduate School of Design, finished under the supervision of Walter Gropius two years before. It envisages a Chinese art museum to be located in China, through

a typically modern structure that is integrated with a theme of the traditional Chinese garden.

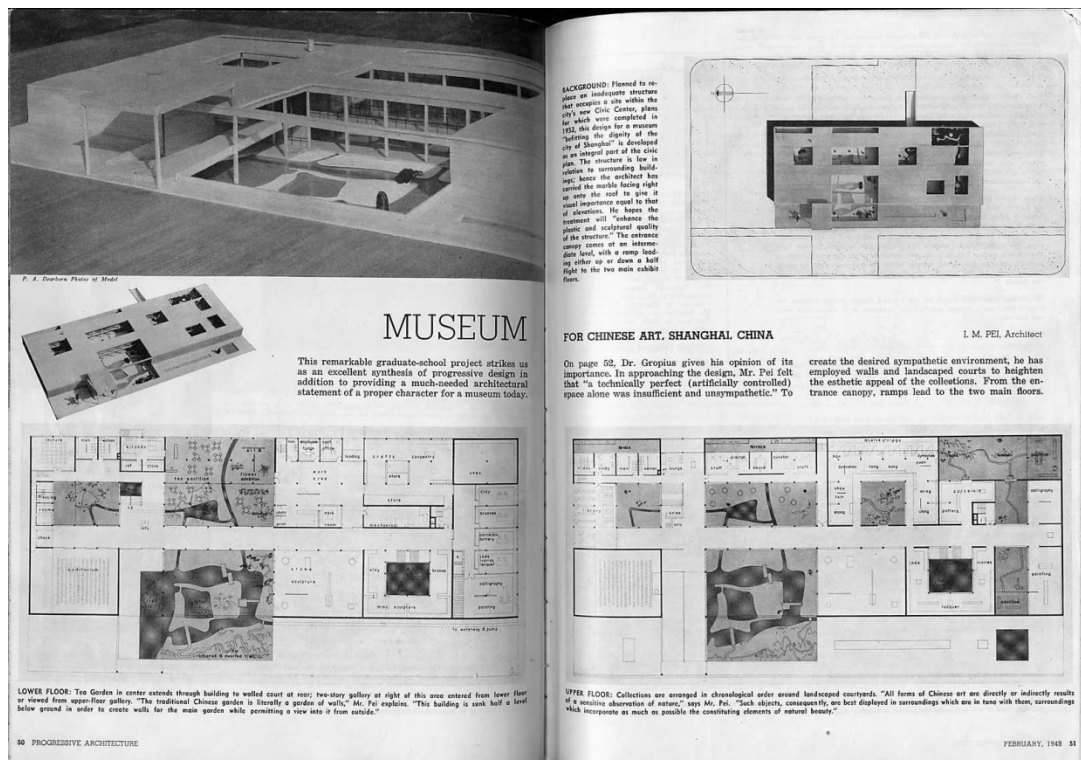


Figure 1. "Museum for Chinese Art, Shanghai, China," *Progressive Architecture*, 28 February (1948), 50–1.

The editor's acknowledgment of the modernist credentials of the design is seen from the use of a large-sized word MUSEUM in the title to emphasise the function of building. This is immediately followed by an enthusiastic opening remark, which says,

This remarkable graduate-school project strikes us as an excellent synthesis of progressive design in addition to providing a much-needed architectural statement of a proper character for a museum today. (*Progressive Architecture*, 1948, p. 50)

This article introduces Pei's design through images of the architectural model and the plan, along with some descriptions provided by Pei. It also provides a review by Gropius (1948: 52), which explains how Pei, through the themes of '*the bare Chinese wall*' and the '*small individual garden patio*', the '*two eternal features*' of Chinese architecture, achieved '*a modern architectural expression on a monumental level*.' Overall, a look at the form and structure of the design immediately reveal its modernist credentials. But meanwhile, I consider it also conveys a strong reference to Chinese culture and a specific concept of national identity that thus challenges the universal standards of modern architecture, and in particular, the so-called International Style. Especially in the context of 1940s America, this Museum for Chinese Art has interestingly combined a testimony to the canon of modern architecture with a representation of national identity through an emphasis on architectural regionalism.

I. M. Pei, Museum for Chinese Art, 1946

The presentation of Pei's project in the article offers the starting point to read the building. The first image is a photo of the architectural model, covering almost half the first page. It presents a distinctive look of the very modernist characters in Pei's design, with elements that remind viewers of Le Corbusier's Five Points on Architecture (Le Corbusier, 1926). The entrance is covered by a modern portico and it connects to a modernist slope leading to the open interior of the courtyard. Two more photos present the overall look of the model.¹ One is next to the caption; the other is on the top of the next page. It is visible that Pei has envisaged a flat-roofed cubic structure, with many openings asymmetrically arranged to reveal the internal garden as a main feature of the building. There is a short description that tells (1948: 51) how the museum, '*befitting the dignity of Shanghai*,' is intended to replace an '*inadequate structure*' in the Civic Centre, the plan of which was finished in 1933. It envisions a two-story gallery space

¹ The close-up view shows a combination of columns and a flat roof. The absence of supporting walls provides a view of the open space of the interior that the free plan independent from the structural function of the supporting *pilotis*. This perspective almost creates a visual effect that the *pilotis*, seen through the openings of the ceiling, are transformed into mullions of the horizontal windows of the building.

built in concrete. The structure is designed to be half beneath the ground, thus the building surface is entirely covered by marble so as to eliminate the disadvantage of its lower height comparing to surrounding buildings, while also help *'enhance the plastic and sculptural quality of the structure.'*²

The architectural plan of the museum presents the layout of the inner galleries, along with short descriptions for each floor. The Lower Floor underground featured a Chinese garden, extending the museum space from the centre to the walled courtyard located at the rear end of the building. Pei (1948: 50) gives an account of the philosophy behind this spatial construction, *'the traditional Chinese garden is literally a garden of walls.'* Pei (1948: 50) further explains how *'this building is sunk half a level below ground in order to create walls for the main garden while permitting a view into it from outside.'*

The plan of the Upper Floor gives an idea of how the exhibiting rooms are arranged by collection type, such as bronze, clay, painting and calligraphy. Items in each room are then displayed in a chronological order. The Chinese garden partitions, while also connecting, the inner galleries. Natural elements such as lotus, bamboos and flowers are scattered around the garden and the tea pavilion. As Pei (1948: 50) considers, this arrangement would help the collections to be *'best displayed in surroundings which are in tune with them, surroundings which incorporate as much as possible the constituting elements of natural beauty.'* Pei (1948: 51) further explains his arrangement in a non-modernist manner that *'all forms of Chinese art are directly or indirectly results of a sensitive observation of nature.'*

The section provides a view of the functional construction of the internal gallery space looking through the two-story structure and the Chinese garden (Figure 2). It shows how the gallery is an open space across the upper and lower levels of the building, connected both to the courtyard of the museum and the long corridor. On view are three iconic Chinese objects that manifest an emphasis on Chinese characteristics. The bottom left of the section features a bronze Buddha bust, to the right of which is a statue of a Chinese philosophical figure riding a

² The placement of the floor level beneath the ground was later best-known in Mies's design of the Neue Nationalgalerie.

refers to teahouses in Chinese culture, which helps make his museum '*a living organism in the life of the people, rather than a cold depository of masterpieces.*' Overall, both the multiple displays of objects originate from Chinese culture and the building's connection to the Chinese garden contribute to a representation of Chinese symbolism.

Mies van der Rohe, Museum for a Small City

The project's modernist credentials are visible from a clear resemblance to Mies van der Rohe's scheme for a 'Museum for a Small City,' which thus reveals Pei's intentional modelling on a Western modernist prototype (Figure 3) (Conrad, 2001, 3–4). In 1943, two American magazines, *Architectural Forum* and *Fortune*, invited twenty-three architects, including Louis Kahn and Mies, to envisage an ideal city in post-war America named "architecture of 194x" (Ozler, 2011; Lambert, 2001, 426–9).⁴ Each architect was responsible for different segments of infrastructure, including, for instance, library, city hall, museum and office buildings, all of which contributed to creating a new image of community life and urban planning (Ozler, 2011).⁵ Mies's proposal came out as a practical and ideal museum space for the enjoyment of the community. This is realised, as Mies (1943: 84) states, through the design of the garden in the centre of the building to eliminate '*the barrier between the art work and the living community*' in '*a noble background for the civic and cultural life.*'

It is not difficult to identify how the two projects resemble a familiarity not only in terms of design philosophy, but also in aspects of structure, materials and the formation of space. Pei's emphasis on the socialising and entertaining purpose of his tea pavilion, built for people of different classes, echoes what Mies suggested

⁴ The prototype of this ideal city was Syracuse, New York. Mies's museum design was inspired by the thesis project of George Danforth, one of his students at IIT. Mies's museum design reflected his previous interest in the composition of "continuous floor and roof planes leading to an open horizon." As it can be noticed from the illustration, Danforth also delineated the drawings of the design. Ozler, L. (July 4, 2011).

⁵ In the realistic context of American architecture, Mies's scheme came out when museum architecture had not yet fully begun to thrive, as Barry Bergdoll (2009, 107–123) recognised the museum boom in America only came in the 1960s.

as creating a cultural background shared by the whole community.⁶ The section of Pei's large gallery conveys a visual equivalence to the interior that Mies created, which indicates a similar spatial composition and the use of artworks as part of the architectural space.⁷ Finally, the emphasis on constructing technique and materials also suggests how Pei's modelling on the Museum for the Small City has in a way responded to this modernist and post-war American architectural identity that Mies presented through his steel framed museum structure.⁸

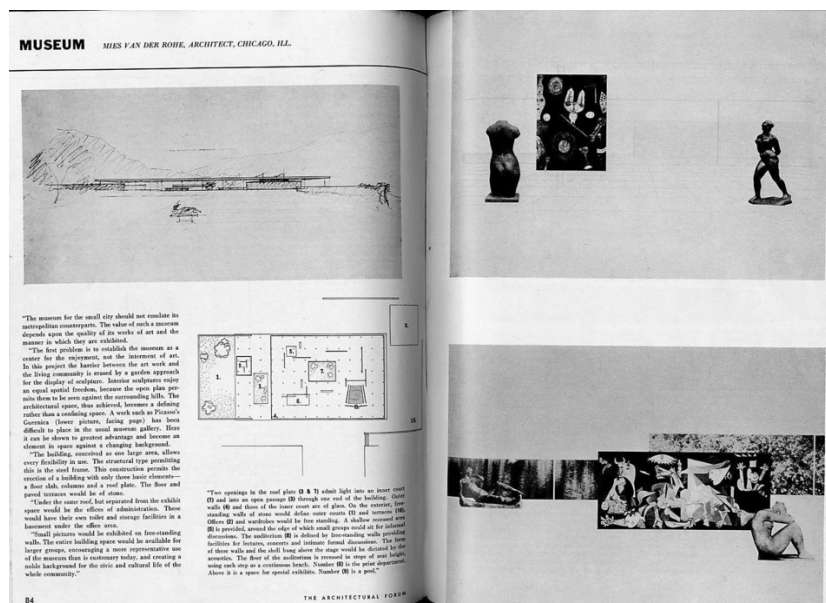


Figure 3. Museum for the Small City, Mies van der Rohe,"
The Architecture Forum, May (1943), 84–85.

⁶ To achieve this connection with the entire community, Pei develops his scheme around the theme of the central courtyard, while Mies also positioned a garden as a primary element to bridge the gap between artworks and visitors from both aesthetic and cultural considerations. In his gallery design, Mies presented an open space, composed by the modernist elements of a floor slab and a roof plate. The structure is supported by steel roof trusses that minimise the use of columns. Pei's detailed descriptions of the materials of the slabs for his roofed structure, supported by the main frame, the plinths of which suggested its role as the main columns of the building, nevertheless conveyed a similar idea of modern materials to create a large and free space for exhibiting uses and for a large group.

⁷ Mies specifically suggests the extra function of Picasso's *Guernica* as part of the spatial structure as a freestanding wall that divides the space.

⁸ The Museum for the Small City reasonably corresponds to the architectural background of post-war American city construction. The use of the steel technique, widely demonstrates in other projects of Mies in Chicago, is a recognition of the American steel industry that nevertheless echoes with the sense of American identity that Mies obtained since he left Germany. The open and flowing space of the Museum for a Small City was also realised through the application of the steel frame, which therefore corresponded to the architectural context of the post-war American city of the 1940s.

The affinity between Pei's design and Mies's envisaged museum explains the progressive and modernist attributes of Pei's design. By blending the modernist form with the theme of a Chinese garden, Pei presents a potential of modernism to develop its language in a Chinese context. This celebration of the modernist prospects of Pei's museum, however, in a way underestimates the regional context Pei experimented with in his design. In fact, one aspect to consider when it comes to Pei's modernist identity is that his search for an architectural expression of a national identity was also a question discussed in America throughout the 1940s.

The search for American regionalism

The Museum of Modern Art was a focus of this prolonged debate on regionalism and modernism. This started from the first architectural exhibition in MoMA in 1932. Entitled *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, it introduced the International Style as the new aesthetics to follow in the development of modern architecture. The principles included the use of modern structure and materials in architectural planning, the emphasis on volume instead of mass of a building, the regular layout of architectural form and proportion, with flexibility in floor planning and, last but not least, the elimination of ornament or decorative pattern in the design (Barr, 1932, 12–17).

While the International Style became a way to celebrate modern identity of America, the years between 1934 and 1945 witnessed a prominence of regional characteristics in American architecture, as have been examined by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis (Lefaivre, 2003, 44). This was first coined with the 1945 MoMA exhibition *Built in USA: 1932–44* (Mock, 1932). In the exhibition catalogue, Philip Goodwin (1945: 5), then Chairman of the Architecture Committee of MoMA, suggested that the International Style was of 'foreign' influence, whereas the regional architecture was more a reflection of 'an

authentic modern American style.⁹ This resistance against modernism was further expressed by curator of the exhibition, Elizabeth Mock, who perceived regional structures, with emphases on traditional or local materials, creative forms, meeting individual needs in their architectural settings, have offered a contemporary direction to develop American architectural modernity which departs from European modernism of the 1920s (Lefaivre, 2003, 25; Mock 1945).¹⁰

In the same year, Sigfried Giedion, then appointed professor at the GSD, published *Nine Points on Monumentality* that called for a modern version of architectural monumentality to accord with new city planning. In contrast, Lewis Mumford criticised Giedion's new monumentality and identified the Bay Region style of the San Franciscan architects as a native form of American modernism in contrast to the European-oriented International Style (Lefaivre, 2003, 25). This was then connected to a round table discussion on "What is happening to Modern Architecture?" in the MoMA to address the tension between the International Style and the Bay Region architecture in February 1948 (Barr et al., 1948).¹¹

My point of mentioning this complicated ongoing process of identifying a modern solution to represent American national and architectural identity is that it must have exerted certain influence on Pei.¹² As Pei's biographer Carter Wiseman (2001: 44) notes, when Pei was working on his graduation project, Pei was also looking for a '*regional or "national" expression in architecture*'. Reflected in his design of the Museum for Chinese Art, this search for a national and regional architectural expression concerns with a specific historical context, which

⁹ Goodwin was also the co-designer of the museum.

¹⁰ Before the exhibition, Mock had already openly criticised the International Style as the rigid European modernism that limited the various manifestation of American modernity. Typical examples of regional architecture enlisted in the exhibition included Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water and the wooden superstructure, House for Chamberlain, designed by Gropius and Breuer.

¹¹ The roundtable was held in MoMA in Feb 1948. In 1952, Hitchcock and Arthur Drexler adopted the name of Mock's exhibition for *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, to reclaim the sovereignty of modern architecture and the International Style. The debate over architectural style and criticism on all of labels of shift-isms only progressed to a more complicated degree, followed by the rivalry between modern and postmodern architecture in the 1960s.

¹² As Barry Bergdoll notes (Bergdoll, 2003, 260–306), Gropius and Breuer were also searching for a regional architectural language, experimented through New England architecture. This might suggest a more direct influence on Pei.

suggests how the work can be read from an entirely different perspective. This reading is concerned with a Chinese context of constructing new architecture that ran in a parallel course to that of Western modernism, as I will explain now.

The Greater Shanghai Plan

As mentioned before, Pei (1948: 51) intended his museum '*to replace an inadequate structure*' in the city's new Civic Centre planned in 1933. The Civic Centre Pei referred to was part of a large-scale urban planning project during 1929-1937, entitled The Greater Shanghai Plan. It was initiated by the Chinese Nationalist Party (which was the rival of the Communist Party until 1949), for the purpose to transform the current image of the city. In the 1930s, Shanghai was partly dominated by the prosperity of British and American International Settlement and French Concession, while also experiencing the underdevelopment of the old Chinese city. The purpose of the Greater Shanghai Plan was to develop a brand-new, Chinese-built image of the metropolis (Macpherson, 1990, 39-62).

In a way, this constructing context is also analogous to the setting of the "architecture of 194x," where Mies developed his Museum for a Small City, as they both propose a utopian and ideal outlook of a post-war urban landscape. The Greater Shanghai Plan started with the planning of an undeveloped area in the Jiangwan District in the northeast of the city. This construction would lead to future urban planning of residential, commercial and industrial zones equipped with transportation and infrastructure, including port, main road and railway system in the new City of Shanghai. Besides recruiting Chinese professionals, the City Planning Commission also consulted American urban planning and engineering experts on the location of the new city, trading ports and railways (Ping, 1999, 70-6). The Civic Centre was the focus of the Greater Shanghai Plan. Presented in a cruciform design, it was envisaged to accommodate the main administrative and public buildings. The most essential construction was the Mayor's Building, surrounded by the city museum, the library, an auditorium, an art gallery and civic courts.

A key aspect to be considered is the architectural style of these buildings. This was specified to be the "Chinese Renaissance Style" that integrated Western techniques with Chinese architectural traditions (Dong, 1935, 105-6; Macpherson, 1990, 54).¹³ In the course of political expansion of the KMT, this so-called the "Chinese Renaissance Style" has been gradually fashioned as an architectural statement of the Nationalist government, which related to their architectural representation of nationalism and national identity. In the Civic Centre of the Greater Shanghai Plan, this was firstly and mostly strongly represented in the Mayor's Building (1931). It features a reinforced concrete four-story structure and a large gabled roof typical of Chinese imperial architecture, with lavish decorations on the exterior such as painted columns and carved totems (Campanella, 2008, 66). Subsequent buildings of the architectural complex, including the city museum, the city library and especially, the aeroplane-shaped Aviation Association building, all built in 1934-35, witnessed a gradual transition in the Style towards a greater involvement with modern elements rather than Chinese ornamentation (Lai, 2006, 202). However, traditional decorations both on the exterior and interior of the monumental buildings were still retained as an essential feature.

Though the exact site on which Pei intended to place his museum was not specified, it is evident that he a challenge to the architectural language of the Chinese Renaissance Style. As suggested by Gropius suggests (1948: 52) in his review, the main concern was *'to avoid having Chinese motifs of former periods added to public buildings in a rather superficial way as was done for many public buildings in Shanghai.'* This reasonably relates difficult to the features perceived from the Chinese Renaissance Style. By using the very specific theme of the Chinese garden, Pei installed bare walls that would be considered typically Chinese, while refraining from the colour and ornamentation of imperial architecture. Pei's nonconformity to the architectural representation of Chinese

¹³ The term initially came from the "adaptability of Chinese architecture" or a "Chinese architectural renaissance," an integration of Western techniques with Chinese traditional styles greatly promoted by American architect Henry Killam Murphy. This was then followed by collaborations with the Nationalist Government for urban planning in Guangzhou and Nanjing, among which was the mapping out of the Capital Plan of Nanjing during 1927-1930 (Cody, 2001, 182-197). The main architect of the Greater Shanghai Plan was Dong Dayou (Dayu Doon).

culture and identity thus offers an alternative vocabulary of the existing architectural forms in the Civic Centre, and meanwhile resonates with the language of “whiteness” in American and European modernism.

Conclusion

The readings of the project in the American post-war context and its envisaged Chinese setting thus leads to my understanding of Pei’s strategy in representing national identity, in which the celebration of the so-called modern architecture might not have necessarily be the capitalised International Modernism. Rather, it is a complicated, plural and integrated form which is difficult to define, one which also incorporates consideration of regional or native characteristics. The Museum for Chinese Art thus reflects Pei’s quest for an expression of Chinese national and cultural identity offers a more diverse employment of regional and modern that blurs the boundaries between regional and Modernist identities. Looking back on the development of architectural debates on modernism and regionalism in America in the 1940s, the formation of Pei’s architectural concept can also be seen as an integration of changed architectural styles in America that particularly links to the representation of national identity.

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